



# Survival Coalition

of Wisconsin Disability Organizations

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*P.O. Box 7222, Madison, Wisconsin 53707*

Date: June 4<sup>th</sup>, 2018

To: Senator Olsen and Representative Kitchens and Members of the Blue Ribbon Commission

From: Sally Flaschberger, on behalf of the Survival Coalition of Wisconsin Disability Organizations

RE: Special Education Funding

Thank you, Senator Olsen and Representative Kitchens, for the opportunity to testify today. My name is Sally Flaschberger and I am an advocate with Disability Rights Wisconsin. Disability Rights Wisconsin is a member of the Survival Coalition of Disability Organizations and I am here today to represent the coalition. The Survival Coalition is comprised of 30 disability organizations in Wisconsin. We work through various targeted teams related to issues that impact people with disabilities in our state, including education

The Survival Coalition supports high expectations for all students with disabilities. This means that in line with best practice research, students must be fully included in their general education curriculum and classroom, learning alongside their peers and are supported to be career and workforce ready. An investment in quality public education for every child with a disability should result in access to postsecondary education or competitive wage employment in the community and the skills to live independently with necessary supports. Unfortunately, Wisconsin parents of children with disabilities are reporting significant dissatisfaction with special education supports and sometimes reporting critical concerns that they relate to lack of funding in special education.

Wisconsin public schools educate approximately 118,000 students with disabilities which is 14% of the total student population. These students qualify for special education services through an Individualized Education Plan (IEP). Services may include education related therapies, classroom accommodations, modified curriculum, or one-on-one support. Research shows us even students with the most significant disabilities can make progress in grade level content when provided with appropriate supports.

Special education categorical aid in Wisconsin has remained flat for a decade while special education costs have increased over 60% since 2000. The rate of state funding reimbursement has fallen from 35.8% to 25.7%. The current special education reimbursement rate for Wisconsin public schools forces

Districts to make tough choices to make up the difference to meet student needs. At the same time, funding for the special needs scholarship program will balloon this year to 90% of the cost to educate a student with a disability. This demonstrates inequitable state funding support for the great majority of students who receive their special education in public schools. In many areas of Wisconsin students with disabilities have no choice school options, or these schools indicate they cannot meet a child's needs.

The committee has repeatedly heard from school districts at each of the hearings about the lack of special education funding. Districts talked about their difficulty serving students and specifically students with mental health disorders. I am here today to share the voice of families and their concerns related to lack of special education funding.

In early January, the Survival Coalition launched a survey related to quality special education supports. We have shared the report created from the survey results with the committee. 574 families of students with disabilities responded to the survey outlining their perceptions and experiences. Families shared significant concerns around loss of staff, poor implementation of services, increases in disciplinary measures and concerns for their children's future. 175 families agreed to share their personal stories related to their child's education to hopefully make an impact on this committee and the state and to highlight the effects of the erosion of funding over the last decade.

We heard from families in 42 counties in Wisconsin. Some of the key findings of the survey were the following:

- a reduction in supports and resources (38% of respondents)
- loss of special education aides (31% of respondents)
- lack of child's progress (35% of respondents)
- child more socially isolated (47% of respondents)
- experiencing more bullying (25% of respondents)
- **58% of families are concerned for their child's future**

The personal stories that families shared ranged from lack of resources and feeling trapped in a school district to a family who quit their job and moved out of the community to try and find better options. Often families commented that schools are trying but don't have what they need due to lack of funding to provide appropriate levels of services and support.

Here is a sampling of the stories we received:

"The staff does the best they can with what they have. Our child is no longer in school as he ended up with such behaviors that the building was inappropriate. When you don't have enough staff or training to support the needs of all the various abilities, what are they to do?"

"She is getting less services and forgetting what she has learned and also only going half days this year. She is going backwards."

"In the last several years our school has gone through 3 special ed teachers, 2 school psychologists and both third grade teachers quit over the summer. There is no quiet space/sensory gym. This is why we decided a private school for our daughter."

"The school does not have enough school/classroom aides like past years. In addition, there are not enough social workers."

"Selling home. Closing business. Moving to a different community/new school district."

"Now that the student is being homeschooled, he has made significant gains both academically and socially. But he is much farther behind peers than he should be because he did not receive appropriate or individualized supports/services when he was in public school."

We have provided you a copy of the stories parents agreed to share as part of the survey. I would ask you take time to read them to understand the crisis families feel due to lack of funding.

In light of these significant impacts, Survival Coalition of Wisconsin recommends the following:

- Increase state special education categorical aid funding to keep pace with local costs. Fund to at least 50% of costs up from 26%, addressing a decade-long funding freeze.
- Even out the reimbursement rate for the special needs scholarship program to more closely match the reimbursement rate for students with disabilities in public schools.
- Initiate a meaningful audit of special education quality and outcomes, including the preparation of students with disabilities for college and the workforce.
- Direct DPI to develop an internal special education quality improvement plan to address achievement gaps for students with disabilities. Direct DPI to set benchmarks for targeted areas (i.e. academic, disciplinary, least restrictive environment and college/workforce readiness indicators and report annually to the legislature.
- Expand categorical aid funding for school mental health staff. Increase categorical aid funding to \$20 million and expand and extend aid to include school counselors, psychologists, and nurses.
- Increase community and school collaborative mental health grants. Increase grant funding to \$10.25 million to support integration and co-location of community mental health services in schools.

- Expand statewide training for school staff and community partners around mental health screening and interventions. Increase funding to \$1.42 million for statewide training in Youth Mental Health First Aid, Trauma Sensitive Schools, and SBIRT (Screening, Brief Intervention, Referral and Treatment).
- Supports enhancement of the current school accountability system to ensure that schools of all kinds – public, voucher, charter, County Children with Disability Education Boards (CCDEBs) report similar data and that allows for informed choice and comparison between options for parents.

Please feel free to contact the following Survival Co-Chair or myself for any additional information on the results of the survey.

Survival Co-Chairs:

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*Survival Coalition is comprised of more than 30 statewide disability organizations that advocate and support policies and practices that lead to the full inclusion, participation, and contribution of people living with disability.*

Real Lives, Real Work, Real Smart, Wisconsin  
Investing in People with Disabilities